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ABSTRACT

In contrast to the problems and policies of school boards of the 1950's and 1960's, when school enrollments increased at an unprecedented rate, the problems of school boards in the 1970's became those of retrenchment. Responding to the issues of declining enrollments and fiscal restraints, the Ontario Ministry of Education in 1981 required every school board in the province to develop, approve, and publicize a school closure policy for use within its jurisdiction. This document reports on a study of the 98 resulting school closure policies to determine (1) the criteria used in the decisionmaking, (2) the internal factors affecting the decision, (3) the external factors influencing the decisionmaking, and (4) the implementation of the plans themselves. The study also incorporated the data into a model depicting the process of school closure decisionmaking employed by Ontario school boards. After a description of the theoretical rationale and methodology of the study, the document presents the findings of three stages of the study: study and review, decisionmaking, and implementation. Most policies were very complete in stage 1, less complete in stage 2, and relatively incomplete in stage 3, indicating a need for further research of both successful and unsuccessful decision and implementation strategies. (1W)

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EDITOR'S NOTE

*This article is a synopsis of a paper which was presented
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SCHOOL CLOSURE POLICY IN ONTARIO

by

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INTRODUCTION

School board members and administrators fondly remember the 1950s and 1960s when the pace of educational change and school enrollments increased at an unprecedented rate. Financial support for school programming and school construction was readily available and these abundant resources allowed for trial-and-error experimentation, "fast track" building construction, and that could be characterized as loose policy decision making. Declining enrollments and fiscal restraint, however, turned the 1970s into a period of retrenchment. Innovation, in contrast to the expansion of the 1960's, became a problem of how to deal with the management of decline. Although early innovative efforts focused on alternate uses of vacant schools space, enrollments in most school systems, especially inner-city cores, declined so rapidly and drastically that school closure became inevitable.

With respect to the phenomenon of decline management, the National Institute of Education in the United States recently published a complete review of the literature (Zerchykov, 1982). In this review, 250 research references were annotated and categorized by genre. According to the reviewers, the literature is rich in data on the fiscal impact of decline, less rich in generalizable data on the programmatic impact of decline, and limited on the processes of responding to decline (p. ix.).

The reviewers found considerable emphasis in the decline management literature on school closure (p. ix) and practical advice to school board administrators which has resulted in the emergence of a professional consensus or "craftlore" (p.xii). One common thread which appears to emerge from the data is the political dimension of the phenomenon. The reviewers state "All of the literature is integrated around a common understanding of the conflict among political expediency, political feasibility, and the educational soundness of various policy options, and of the recurring tensions between technical and political rationality in implementing these options" (p. xv).

With respect to Canadian literature, there is a dearth of case study material and national surveys do not appear to exist. One feature common to most Canadian

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literature, is that the principles and strategies which worked well during the expansionary period of the 1950s and 1960s do not apply in a period of retrenchment and decline. In this light, school board policy makers and administrators have been forced to readjust their former expansionary thinking and perceptions concerning growth to find workable strategies yet ensure the quality of education during this period.

One common theme among American and Canadian studies is that policy decision making responding to declining enrollment and school closure is very political in nature. While most studies stress the importance of cooperation among all groups to solve the problems of declining enrollment, Townsend (1980) suggests that community involvement is critical in the politics of decline. Although Ponder (1981) warns that school boards must seek input from parents concerning the possible closure of their community school or court disaster, Scott, Hickcox and Ryan (1978) support the concept of community participation but remind us that the final school closure decision belongs to the school board which is responsible for fair, efficient and workable policies acceptable to the ratepayers.

Although much of the literature emphasizes the need for proactive rather than reactive policies, concern for flexibility and adaptability within the system is cited. Many authors agree that demographic trends are strong criteria which impact on the decision-making process to close a school but the school board's policy must be general enough that local situations, particularly in remote or isolated districts, should be exceptions whereby school closure is not forced for a variety of reasons even though enrollment is declining. The fear that enrollment decline may slow considerably and even increase in some jurisdictions causes some authors to caution school boards not to dispose of all of their excess buildings suggesting that some of them could be "mothballed" and kept for possible future needs. Other alternative uses for vacant school space have been suggested such as adult education, senior citizens' programs, continuing education, early childhood education, second language instruction and cultural or community uses.

Jackson (1978) and Scott, Hickcox and Ryan (1978), among many researchers in this area, all stress the possibility that maintaining a school facility at less than its operational capacity may be far less expensive than the costs involved to bus the students to alternate accommodation and the associated political turmoil among ratepayers who do not want their community school closed. They also indicate that the age of a school facility, the condition of the building, and costly renovations to a receiving school to which a closed school's students must be transferred have to be considered. All of the writers also agree that a new era of cooperation between neighbouring school districts and community agencies

needs to be fostered in order to develop a sharing attitude rather than a single ownership mentality.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

Some Ontario school boards faced the issue of declining enrollments early in the 1970s and developed school closure policies. Following the publication of a comprehensive study for the Ontario Ministry of Education by the Commission on Declining Enrolments in Ontario in 1978, the Ministry's response to the development of school closure policy by local school board was accelerated. In a memorandum from the Ontario Ministry of Education dated January 30, 1981, every school board in the province was required to develop, to approve, and to publicize a policy outlining the procedures which a school board would follow when it considered whether a school facility within their jurisdiction should be closed.

The main objective of this study is the collection and analysis of these school closure policies in order to determine the criteria used in the decision making, the internal factors affecting the decision, the external factors impacting on the decision making, and the implementation of the plan resulting from the decision making.

A second objective is to provide an understanding of the phenomenon from a theoretical perspective by incorporating the data into a framework or model to depict the process of decision making currently employed by Ontario school boards when school closure is being considered.

THEORETICAL RATIONALE

For the purposes of this study, the theoretical framework for the analysis of school closure policy developed by Ontario school boards concerns itself with planned change. By means of public policy, this change has a predetermined focus which is designed to alter organizational structure and behaviour. Change literature is extensive and no attempt is made in the paper to provide a complete review of it but merely to draw some general conclusions and to provide a focus.

Chin and Benne in Bennis et al. (1976) describe three different strategies for changing which have some applicability to school closure policy. Rational-empirical approaches assume that men are rational beings and, if they can be convinced that the change will create a better state, they will make the effort to change; normative-reeducative approaches view man as an active searcher for solutions to his problems and in constant quest of need satisfaction through continuous transactions with his environment; and power-coercive approaches view man as a powerless, manipulable being where all planned change depends on some type of power whether it be political, economical or moral (p. 23).

Because school systems are "open" organizations, they are not only influenced by intra-organizational factors

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but are permeable to external influences and are forced to be more responsive to their environment, local politics, and to various public demands. Planned change in the educational setting is sharply influenced by these extra-organizational factors which are external to the school system. Canadian and American literature on the management of decline and school closure emphasizes internal and external political forces, with particular emphasis on the latter (Townsend, 1982).

Although the word "policy" can be traced to its Greek and Roman roots, policy and policy making seem to reflect modern complex societies and the social institutions which have developed within them. This study, however, is concerned with an analysis of policies which have already been formulated and it is not its purpose to review the vast body of literature with respect to policy and policy making. It is probably sufficient to draw a few general conclusions. First, many models of policy making and policies on policy making exist. Second, policy making is viewed as a specialized process of decision making which responds to external and internal demands from a political and social environment and third, public policy such as school closure decision-making is the result of a conversion process which takes place within a polity or political system called a school board.

METHODOLOGY

Before an analysis could begin, the first step in this study involved the collection of the school closure policies from the school boards. Assistance was obtained from The Association of School Business Officials (OASBO) who wrote to their members, explained the purpose of the research, and requested that they send a copy of their school closure policy to the researcher. Of the possible 125 school closure policies which might have been available, ninety-eight were collected. These included school closure policies developed by Ontario school boards between 1970 and 1982. Some school board officials informed the researcher that they were in the process of revising their policy or had not as yet developed one and it was, therefore, not available.

The data analysis employed a modified type of qualitative meta analysis consisting of four phases. The first phase provided a framework for the analysis by posing the basic research questions to be answered and a delineation of the data base for the study. In the development of the research questions, the literature on management of decline, organizational change, and policy and policy making was examined and four questions were formulated to guide the research. They were:

1. How is school closure effected by school boards in Ontario?

2. What internal factors affect the decision to close a school?
3. How is school closure decision making affected by external forces?
4. How do school boards implement a decision to close a school?

In phase two, the school closure policies were analyzed through an application of the four research questions and a systematic listing of the criteria' identification of relationships, and a comparison of the processes. The end result of this phase is an integrative view of the data sources which provided answers to the research questions posed in phase one.

The tabulated results from phase two were then categorized by means of repeated sorting of the factors in phase three. These classification procedures included further analyzing, abstracting and generalizing from among the lists of criteria and factors extracted from the data in the previous phase of analysis.

The fourth and final phase involved interpretation and evaluation of the interpretation in order to develop a process model of school closure policy for Ontario school boards. The adequacy of explanation in the theoretical model is dependent upon the sufficiency of the categorical scheme and the process which is utilized to give it meaning.

FINDINGS

In the sample of ninety-eight school closure policies collected for the analysis, public boards of education comprised sixty-two percent and separate school boards thirty-eight percent. With respect to the size of student populations, sixty-one of the school boards in the sample were classified as medium to large in size and thirty-seven as small to medium. Although the average length of the policies was four pages, they varied in length and content from a single paragraph of intent to a professionally prepared fifty-three page booklet of very detailed processes and procedures. Twenty-one policies were a single page only and could be characterized as being very general in nature and basically incomplete for analytical purposes.

The process model which emerged from the data analysis comprised three sequential stages including a study or review stage, a decision-making stage, and an implementation stage.

STUDY AND REVIEW STAGE

Seventy-two policies began with a philosophical statement of policy and intent to conduct an administrative study or review. In order of frequency, the statements recommended that the following concepts would be considered: balance of quality education and cost (80%); maintenance of the community school concept (29%);

development of a child's potential with a complete program of studies (10%); and an equitable distribution of the board's financial resources (7%).

After the statement of intent, a formal administrative review was required by fifty-six policies at twelve or eighteen month intervals or every five years. The system people responsible for this review, in order of frequency, were cited as: school superintendent (40%); director of education (28%); the board (19%); and a regular standing committee of the board (13%).

One of the most interesting features of the administrative review was the listing of criteria which would be used to identify schools that should be considered for closure. Eighty-six policies listed the various criteria which would be used for identification purposes and, in order of frequency, they were: per pupil cost (73%); renovation and maintenance cost (73%); program viability (62%); ministry or occupational capacity (59%); split grades (51%); enrollment and demographic trends (45%); and staffing, pupil teacher ratio (PTR) or class size (39%). It should be noted that many of the criteria are financial and primarily related to cost. In general, most policies allowed secondary schools to drop to fifty percent of capacity while elementary schools were reviewed when enrollment declined to sixty percent.

Up to this point in the administrative study or review phase of the first stage in the model for school closure, only persons internal to the school system were involved in the identification of schools which could be closed in accordance with the board's criteria. Eighty-six policies indicated that any school considered to be a potential candidate for closure would be reported to the board.

A second phase of the study and review stage involved the establishment of an advisory committee and eighty-six policies recommended that it be struck when administration informed the board of schools which appeared to meet the pre-established criteria for closure. The membership of internal people on the committee, in order of frequency, included: trustees (69%); board officials (56%); school principals (53%); teachers (42%); and students (5%). Those from the community who were external to the formal bureaucratic school system were listed as: parents (64%); ratepayers or non-parents (51%); and others including pastors, town planners, businessmen etc. (13%).

Thirty policies recommended that the public be informed of a potential school closure when it was identified. An additional thirty-nine policies required public notification following the establishment of the advisory committee and the remaining seventeen policies were silent concerning any announcements to the community.

A majority of the policies recommended that public meetings be held and, in some instances, formal submissions from affected communities were solicited. In

seventy-seven policies, the terms of reference to be followed by the advisory committee were outlined in some detail. In order of frequency they were: financial (79%); program (76%); enrollments (69%); community use (66%); alternative possible uses (56%); condition of the school facility (52%); school boundary changes required (44%); alternative school organization including double and triple grading (38%); and staffing (37%).

Stage one, the review and study stage, appeared to conclude when the advisory committee's report, complete with its recommendations, was received by the board.

DECISION-MAKING STAGE

Although seventy-seven policies were relatively complete up to the end of the first stage of the model, many of them concluded at this point or were unclear as to the board's intention with respect to the advisory committee's recommendation to close or not to close a school. The policies seemed to allow only two possibilities following receipt of the advisory committee's report. Either the recommendation was accepted or it was not. Only fifteen policies allowed for a simultaneous release of the report to the public and to the board.

When the board accepted the recommendation to close a school, twenty policies called for public notification of the board's action. In another twenty-two policies, the board moved "an intent to close" before it made a final decision. In either case, further reaction from the affected community was expected yet only twenty policies called for additional public meetings before a final decision was made.

Public notification in some policies was apparently nothing more than that. The public was notified and the school closed in a specific date. In the majority of the policies where public notification of a closing was recommended, it was indicated that this notification was to allow additional input from the community including an appeal of the closure decision. Some policies provided for a specific timeframe, three months for example, before a final board decision was made.

In most instances where there was a recommendation from the advisory committee not to close a school or, a non-closure decision by the board of a school recommended for closure was made, several policies suggested that other alternative uses for the school should be explored or other alternatives studied to solve the school's attendance problems. The majority of the policies that were complete up to the end of the third, or implementation stage, recommended that a school which had been identified for closure and yet not closed either because of an advisory committee's recommendation or a final board decision would be returned to the normal administrative cyclical review. Therefore, unless either the

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criteria or the circumstances for closure changed, the school would, in all likelihood, be identified again as a candidate for closure in the future.

IMPLEMENTATION STAGE

Fifty-eight policies were virtually silent with respect to any reference to implementation procedures by the board and, as indicated earlier, are incomplete. Of the remaining forty policies, twenty-two recommended continued public involvement by means of an implementation committee. Seven of these policies recommended a completely new implementation committee while fifteen suggested that the former advisory committee would be charged with this responsibility. In the remaining eighteen policies, school closure activities were to be conducted exclusively by the boards' administrative officials without any further involvement by any other internal or external people.

In the case of a non-closure decision by the board in the second stage of the model, the advisory committee was often charged with the study of alternative uses for the school before it was returned to the stage one cyclical review which was conducted each year, at eighteen-month intervals or every five years. In this respect, a school would continue to be singled out for closure unless, as mentioned earlier, the criteria or circumstances changed.

CONCLUSION

Although a three-stage model emerged from the data analysis, not all of the policies proceeded completely through the three stages. In general, most policies were very complete in stage one, the study and review period, less complete in stage two, decision making, and relatively incomplete in stage three, implementation. The stages were sequential in nature and a feedback loop existed for schools which met the criteria for closure but were not closed and were then returned to the review and study stage for future consideration. All of the elements and factors which were identified by the analysis were found to be interactive during the process because school closure, as witnessed by the literature, is political. Many internal and external forces and people influence the decision-making process and, therefore, continuous evaluation and revision of strategies employed in school closure are necessary.

In this analysis of ninety-eight school closure policies, twenty-one were incomplete and unsuitable for a complete analysis with the exception of the philosophical statements and some general criteria which identified potential schools for closure; eighty-six listed more comprehensive criteria to be used for the identification of schools; seventy-seven were complete enough for stage one analysis, the study and review phase; fifty-six had sufficient data for stage two, the decision-making phase; and only forty policies gave sufficient detail for stage three analysis, implementation.

Because the history of school closure in Ontario has been quite turbulent with respect to school board and community relations where closure has occurred, Townsend (1982) examined several case studies and concluded that gradual closing of a school appears to encounter fewer difficulties (p. 289). For example, a school could be phased out by extending boundaries of adjacent schools to absorb students, making it an annex for one year and then finally closing it or the students could be transferred one or two grades at a time (p. 289).

One factor which appears to be critical in today's open and political system is the involvement of the public in school board decision-making, particularly when it involves the closing of a community school. Although the process may be more time-consuming, the results should be more politically acceptable than the kind of turmoil which can be associated with independent bureaucratic action.

Because most school boards developed their school closure policies in isolation, this study may provide some assistance with future revisions, extensions, and refinements in the procedures and practices. The main weakness appeared to be the lack of implementation stage detail in forty policies and the complete absence of any reference to implementation in the other eighty. Additional research is required particularly with the documentation of individual case studies of both successful and unsuccessful school closure decisions and of successful implementation strategies once the decision to close was made.

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